Conceptualizing Cultural Variations in Close Friendships

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Abstract

The goal of this article is to propose a model, new to the field, describing cultural variations in close friendships. The model addresses shortcomings in past research regarding how close friendships differ in individualist compared to collectivist cultures. The model proposes three dimensions, with six overlapping but conceptually useful styles of friendship, *Independents* versus *Interveners*, *Includers* versus *Excluders*, and *Idealists* versus *Realists*. Succinct, simplified descriptors of each style follow: *Independents* respect each other's autonomy, value spending quality time with friends, and support each other's sense of self. *Interveners* are actively involved in their friends' lives, reflecting the highly interdependent nature of their relationships. *Includers* behave in an open and friendly manner with nearly everyone they encounter, distinguishing between close friends and mere acquaintances in cognitive and emotional realms, but not in their outward behaviors. *Excluders* make clear distinctions between friends and acquaintances behaviorally as well as emotionally and cognitively. *Idealists* tend to exaggerate their ratings of close friends on anonymous questionnaires and avoid direct confrontations that might cause loss of face. *Realist* friends tend to rate each other in more nuanced, objective ways, and feel uninhibited about directly confronting friends when they feel that it might be for their friends' ultimate benefit.

Introduction

The goal of this article is to propose a model describing cultural variations in close friendships. This work initially grew out of a plethora of research by scholars in communications and psychology defining the individualism-collectivism (I-C) dimension, which describe cultural variations in the nature of all interpersonal relationships. When this work is applied specifically to close friendships, several shortcomings are revealed. The proposed model adapts aspects of the I-C dimension while modifying others to form three cultural dimensions resulting in six overlapping, but conceptually useful, cultural styles of close friendships.

Social researchers as well as laypeople have very different ideas about what it means to be a close friend (e.g. Gareis, 1999; Rawlins, 2009). Some of these differences are simply a matter of personality or personal preferences. Some portion of this variability can be attributed to one's cultural background (Chen, 2006; Gareis, 1995; Hruschka, 2010). Although much is written about cultural variations in social behaviors in general (Goodwin, 1999; Smith, Fischer, Vignoles, & Bond, 2013; Triandis, 1994, 1995), relatively little has been published about how these variations are manifest in people's closest friendships. This article addresses this omission by proposing a framework for conceptualizing cultural variations in close friendships.

This article begins by reviewing cultural variations in how we use the term "friend," then describes "classic" ideas about culture and friendship based on the I-C dimension, followed by more recent research that reveal shortcomings of the classic approach. Then I describe the proposed model comprised of three dimensions and six cultural styles of close friendship. This is followed by a review of gender differences growing out of this research, sections outlining the limitations of this research and suggestions for future research, ending with practical implications of the model for friendships that cross cultural lines.

Cultural Variations of the Term "Friend"

This work focuses on one's closest friends, and how these relationships differ across cultures. In most English speaking countries, the term "friend" can be employed very loosely, occasionally even referring to a person one has just met. A wide range of associates can be referred to as "friends" (Goodwin, 1999). Other cultures have a much more restrictive use of the term; both linguistically and socially (Stewart & Bennett, 1991). Throughout the world, the pervasive use of social media such as Facebook further complicates the definition of this term, since all of one's social contacts on these digital platforms are referred to as "friends."

Cultural variation in the very meaning of the term "friend" poses serious problems for researchers attempting to sort out cultural aspects of these close relationships. One way to solve this dilemma is to allow the respondents themselves to identify a particular close friend to serve as the basis for responding to survey questions (Baumgarte, Lee, & Kulich, 2001). In this way, the objective qualities of close friendship can vary across cultures, while leaving the respondents' definition of close friend as the relevant perspective. This strategy also

encourages respondents to avoid thinking about friendships generically, and to focus on the concrete qualities of an actual, experienced friendship.

The only other criterion was that respondents weren't allowed to choose as a close friend someone for whom they had romantic feelings. Romance and friendship are quite different phenomena (e.g., Monsour, 2002; Werking, 1997), and this work focuses on the latter. My surveys included a validity-check item asking about romantic aspects of the specific friendship they had targeted for their responses. Any respondent indicating romantic interest was eliminated from the data analyses (Baumgarte, et al, 2001).

The Classic I-C Approach to Friendship

Reviews of the research on culture and friendship often base their conclusions on commonplace assumptions about the I-C dimension describing cultural variations in social beliefs and behaviors. I will refer to this understanding as the classic I-C model of friendship and culture to clearly contrast it with the model I am proposing. The classic I-C model makes the assertion that people in individualist cultures tend to cultivate a larger number of superficial and short-lived friendships compared to those in collectivist cultures where one's friends are seen as fewer in number, closer or more profound, and longer lasting (e.g. Goodwin, 1999; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Triandis, 1995).

Cross-cultural researchers and theorists make these classic I-C assertions most explicitly when close friendships in the United States (U.S.) are contrasted with those in other cultures. Many hold that people in the U.S. are not interested in close friendships, preferring instead a wide variety of superficial friends with low levels of involvement and commitment. This classic I-C version of friendships has been quite pervasive, espoused by the writings of psychologists (Goodwin, 1998, 1999; Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995), communication theorists (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Hall & Hall, 1990; Stewart & Bennett, 1991), anthropologists (Kluckhohn, 1954), and social historians (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, & Tipton, 1985). It can be found in guides for expat workers (Copeland & Griggs, 1985) and for international students coming to study in the U.S. (Lanier, 1988; Althen & Bennet, 2011).

Despite the prevalence of the classic I-C model that people in the U.S. and individualist cultures in general are interested in only superficial friendships with a larger number of people and that these friendships tend to be of shorter duration when compared to people in collectivist cultures, until recently, no one has actually tested these assertions empirically. That is, no one has asked individuals from a range of cultures how many people they count as close friends, how long have they been friends with each, or compared measures of relationship closeness.

More Recent Research

More recently, a small number of cross-cultural researchers have been doing precisely that, and the picture that emerges from this research often defies these widespread assertions. Baumgarte et al. (2001) found that university students in the U.S. reported the smallest

number of close friends compared to students in France, Romania, South Korea, and China. They found no systematic differences in the longevity of their closest friendships, and respondents in the U.S. scored higher on measures of relationship closeness compared to respondents in collectivist cultures. French, Bae, Pidada, and Lee (2006) were able to verify in one culture, South Korea, the classic I-C assumption that friendships in collectivist cultures were more intimate and less extensive than those in individualist cultures, but found just the opposite pattern in another collectivist culture, Indonesia. Using diverse samples, Rybak and McAndrew (2006) found that respondents in the U.S. rated their friendships as closer and more intimate than those in Poland.

Takahashi, Ohara, Antonucci, and Akiyama (2002) compared very diverse samples in the U.S. and Japan, and found that Japanese respondents rated their friendships as less affectively close compared to U.S. respondents. Also contrary to classic I-C assumptions, they found that Japanese respondents had a more inclusive definition of the concept of friend, i.e., including a wider variety of persons as close friends when compared to respondents in the U.S. You and Malley-Morrison (2000) found that Koreans reported less intimate relationships with their friends compared to respondents in the U.S.

This research does suggest that cultures differ significantly in what it means to be a close friend. However, I will show that cultural variations in the very nature of what constitutes relationship closeness are so profound that any such assertions about whose friendships are closer could be called into question. These studies suggest that the classic I-C view needs to be amended to form a more coherent, empirically based conceptualization of cultural variations in close friendships.

The framework I'm proposing provides ways of thinking about cultures and friendships that clarify these issues and allow for a deeper understanding of these important relationships. It takes aspects of the I-C dimension of cultural variation in social behaviors, such as self-construal, independent/interdependent nature of close relationships, and in-group/out-group distinctions, and applies them to close friendships.

It should be noted that certain aspects of the I-C dimension remain controversial, such as problems in measurement and the fact that it lumps together quite different cultures under a single rubric (e.g., Fischer et al., 2009; Taras et al., 2014). However, most researchers continue to find it useful, as evidenced by the fact that current issues of the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* often include articles whose authors cite it to explain their results. So the goal of my work is not to question the overall I-C construct, but simply how it as been applied to the concept of close friendship.

To conceptualize my findings and those of many others, I've developed three dimensions that hold special significance for how people in various cultures think about and behave toward their closest friends. These dimensions can be seen as an elaboration of the original I-C dimension, applying various expressions of the I-C dimension to close friendships, and at the same time, they address the shortcomings in the I-C approach described above. The proposed model leads to a more complex, nuanced understanding of cultural variations in close friendships beyond simply the number of close friends and the longevity and closeness of these relationships.

What follows presents each of these sub-dimensions along with arguments and supporting data. My research uses friendships in the U.S. as the individualist anchor point in these comparisons. As such, the framework applies most clearly to contrasting friendships in the U.S. with those in a sampling of other, mostly collectivist cultures.

An examination of the endpoints for each dimension results in six cultural styles of close friendship, and the descriptions of each represent the most extreme, exaggerated versions. It should be noted that in reality, countless social, personality, and contextual factors, in addition to one's culture, determine the nature of any friendship. Further complicating the picture, within any national culture, especially one as diverse as that of the U.S., it is likely that all six styles would be in evidence to differing degrees. Yet, the cross-cultural research that forms the basis of this model suggests that some styles are more common in a given culture compared to others.

This work also allows for a cross-cultural examination of gender differences in close friendships. While not the core focus of this work, much has been written about gender and friendship (e.g., Canary, Emmers-Sommer, & Faulkner, 1997). However, cross-cultural perspectives on this issue have been quite scattered and piecemeal (e.g. Goodwin, 1999), mostly involving two-culture comparisons, which don't allow for robust generalizations across cultures. My work will add a multicultural perspective to these findings.

Interveners versus Independents

Originating from a core tenet of the I-C theory, this dimension elaborates and contrasts the instrumental interdependence of friendships in collectivist cultures with the emotionally supportive nature of friendships in individualist cultures (e.g. Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1994, 1995). It makes assertions beyond the classic I-C model regarding the responsibilities of close friends, the application of exchange theory, but most of all, its assumptions about the very nature of relationship closeness.

Intervener style friendships presume that a strong sense of duty or obligation binds the friends together. *Intervener* friends feel it is their responsibility to advise, aid, protect, take care of, instruct, and otherwise influence their friends in positive ways. *Independent* style friendships assume that good friends should respect each other's autonomy and individuality. They support each other by spending quality time together away from the stressors of everyday life. The literature review that follows elaborates this contrast more sharply and directly.

Fons Trompenaars and his associates (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998) asked participants from a variety of cultures to imagine they were passengers in a car being driven by a close friend, who was speeding and hit a pedestrian. The question was whether the participants would testify against the friend, who would serve jail time as a result. In general, people in individualist cultures were more likely to testify their close friend was indeed speeding, whereas people in collectivist cultures would not. The former group saw it as a matter of telling the truth in a court of law, even if the close friend had to pay the

consequences. The latter group felt that true friends should take care of each other, especially during difficult times.

The differences found in the Trompenaars' studies are quite large, illustrating the extent to which cultures differ in their expectations about what it means to be a close friend. *Interveners* do not see themselves as "lying" to save their friend from going to jail. For them, the moral or righteous thing to do is to stand by their friend. *Independents* tend not to feel they have a choice—in a court of law, they must tell the objective truth. They would stand by their friends in times of need by being good listeners and providing much appreciated ego support. But this support grows more out of a sense of affection rather than duty.

A parallel contrast between *Interveners* and *Independents* can be seen in one of my own studies (Baumgarte, 2001). University students in France, Spain, Cuba, U.S., and China read and rated a short vignette where a university student was actively intervening in the life of a close friend, such as reading and correcting the friend's class notes. Students read the vignettes in their own languages with character names appropriate for their own cultures. Students scoring higher on measures of collectivism (predominantly in Cuba, China, and Spain) rated the friendship as healthy and caring, whereas students scoring higher on measures of individualism (predominantly in the U.S. and France) saw the friends' behaviors as unhealthy and inappropriate. *Independents* find such interventions disrespectful, invasive, and controlling, perhaps implying one is incompetent to handle one's own affairs (Reinhardt, Boerner, & Horowitz, 2006).

The proposed model refines how we view the exchanges that naturally occur between close friends. Exchange theory, which explains the give and take in close relationships, suggests that reciprocity is a common goal in close friendships (e.g. Kay, 2003; Thibaut & Kelly, 1959). This approach to friendship is compatible with the *Independent* style of friendship (Goodwin, 1999; Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Nishida, 1996), since *Independent* friends tend to value their autonomy and sense of self-sufficiency. From this perspective, they don't want to be indebted to anyone, even close friends, and thus are motivated to reciprocate any favor or service they receive from a friend so as to "even the score."

The proposed model suggests that *Interveners* have little sense of reciprocity (Goodwin, 1999; Gudykunst et al., 1996). The concept of indebtedness might apply to other relationships, such as among business associates, but not close friends and family. Accordingly, *Interveners* feel responsible for their friends' welfare, even if the exchange between friends becomes decidedly lopsided (Cha, 1994; Gao, 1996; Ikkink & van Tilburg, 1998; Koh, Mendelson, & Rhee 2003; Yum, 1987). Their strong sense of duty will encourage them to continue intervening for the benefit of their friends, even when these efforts are not reciprocated. There may be very long-term expectations about correcting a lopsided exchange, perhaps in terms of decades or even generations, but such considerations don't fit current versions of exchange theory.

Emic factors can further flesh out the distinctions between *Intervener* and *Independent* friendships, such as the Korean concept of *choeng* (Lee, 1994; Lim & Choi, 1996; Yum & Canary, 2003) and similar concepts in other East Asian cultures (Goodwin, 1999; Maeda & Ritchie, 2003). These terms can be applied to friendships as well as familial relationships

and carry strong implications regarding caring, duties, and obligations of a good friend. There are no equivalent concepts in western, individualistic cultures (Leib, 2011).

The *Intervener-Independent* distinction influences how one values notions of dependency, including how one sees one's self in relation to others. Kitayama, Park, Sevincer, Karasawa, and Uskul (2009) found that an independent mindset is much more normative among people in the U.S. and other individualist cultures, where feelings of dependency among friends are seen as psychologically unhealthy (Furman, 2001; Kağitçibaşi, 1989; Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, McDowell, & Sage, 2003). These studies suggest the opposite pattern for collectivist cultures. For them, one who does not cultivate dependence on close friends and family is seen as egotistical, aloof, and uncaring.

Relationship closeness among *Intervener* friends is based primarily on their interdependence, feeling confident that one's friends will always be there for them in times of need. By contrast, closeness among *Independents* relies more heavily on self-disclosure, mutual acceptance, and respect, feeling free to talk about anything, being good listeners, building up each other's self-confidence, and simply enjoying each other's company (Adams & Plaut, 2003; Chen & Nakazawa, 2012; Kito, 2005; Nicotera, 1993; Ryan, La Guardia, Solky-Butzel, Chirkov, & Kim, 2005; Taylor et al., 2004). In studies conducted in the U.S., researchers have found that supporting each other's identity is critical to friendship formation and maintenance (Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000; Weisz & Wood, 2005; Werner & Parmlee, 1979).

Theorists who have based their understanding of cultural variations in close friendship solely on the classic I-C model have assumed that the interdependent nature of friendships in collectivist cultures renders those relationships as much closer and more intimate than friendships in individualist cultures (e.g. Goodwin, 1999; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Triandis, 1995). But interdependence and relationship closeness are quite different concepts (Kim, Butzel, & Ryan, 1998). It is easy to imagine one resenting taking care of, or being taken care of by a friend, thus rendering that friendship as less than "close."

The very nature of these two contrasting styles greatly complicates any comparison of friendship closeness across cultures. For some, closeness is a matter of instrumental interdependence, knowing that a friend will actively intervene when one is in need. For others, closeness is based largely on self-disclosure, feeling free to share one's innermost thoughts. Closeness can also stem from feelings of support where friends reliably provide words of encouragement, bolstering each other's egos. For this reason, when comparisons in friendship closeness are made across cultures, results do not reliably show that collectivist or *Intervener* cultures have closer friendships compared to individualist or *Independent* cultures (Adams & Plaut, 2003; Bell & Coleman, 1999; Chen, 1995; French et al., 2006; Hsu, 1985; Li, 2002; Nicotera, 1997; Rybak & McAndrew, 2006; Sheets & Lugar, 2005; Takahashi et al., 2002; You & Malley-Morrison, 2000; Yum & Canary, 2003). These findings contrast sharply with the classic I-C model, which holds that people in individualist cultures do not, generally speaking, cultivate close friendships.

A brief TED talk about this dimension can be found at http://www.friendsbeyondbordersbook.com/?page_id=69. A hypothetical case study contrasting these two styles of friendship can be found here.

Excluders versus Includers

This dimension grew out of in-group/out-group distinctions, a central feature of the classic I-C approach, originally conceived by Lewin (1948) and thoroughly established since that time (e.g., Goodwin, 1999; Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1994, 1995). Applying these concepts to close friendships allows for an elaboration of the differing social skills characteristic of the two groups, the differing nature of their needs for social approval, and the assertion that both groups cultivate close friendships.

People in collectivist cultures tend to take an *Excluder* approach to their social relationships, making clear distinctions in their feelings, behaviors, and attitudes toward in-group members, which include family, friends, and perhaps close work colleagues, and out-group members who comprise everyone else. They think about the two groups quite differently. They project a very warm demeanor and feel at ease with people in their in-groups, but behave more cautiously, formally, and brusquely with all others.

The opposite is assumed to be the case for people in individualist cultures who espouse the *Includer* approach to all of their social relationships. *Includers* tend to be open and friendly to nearly everyone they encounter in their day-to-day lives. From outward appearances, they seem to make no distinction between in-group and out-group members, treating everyone with familiarity, cheerfulness, and warmth. These appearances can be deceptive. I will provide evidence that emotionally and cognitively, they do see a select group as being their close friends, and these friendships provide documented health and well-being benefits.

What follows is a more detailed description of these two proposed styles of close friendship. These descriptions represent the ends of the dimension, and thus are extreme versions.

Most theorists agree that it is more difficult to make friends with *Excluders*, but once the connection has been established, the friends treat each other as very special people (Goodwin, 1999; Salamon, 1977; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). Outside observers can easily tell they are good friends. *Excluders* do not act in a friendly manner to out-group members and don't expect them to be friendly in return. They don't expect people they don't know to like them, and thus do little to earn strangers' social approval.

When with their close friends, *Excluders* value social harmony and avoid any sort of public disagreement or anything that would suggest relationship conflict. They tolerate each other's idiosyncrasies and preferences (Verma, 1992). They demonstrate what could be thought of as "social skills for intimacy," (Cohen, 1991; Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1994, 1995) knowing how to get along, maintaining social harmony, enjoying each other's company, even for extended periods of time like spending long vacations together. Conflicts can occur, but typically they are avoided, or more simply, just allowed to fade into the past.

Not only do *Excluders* have little need for the social approval of out-group members, they pay very little attention to them. Out-group members are of so little consequence in their day-to-day lives that *Excluders* can completely ignore them, almost as if they didn't "exist." For example, in public spaces where one encounters many strangers, one is not

expected to say, "Excuse me" when accidentally bumping one of these "non-existent" out-group members; it's simply not done. This insular public presentation grows out of the cultural norm of not acknowledging the existence of outsiders (e.g., Kohls, 2001).

Includers cultivate quite the opposite approach to their social lives. From outward appearances, they treat everyone with an equal degree of warmth and friendliness, leaving the impression that everyone is a friend, at least at some superficial level. In many cases, they're so open to making friendly conversation with complete strangers that they appear to completely lack the concept of exclusivity in friendship. There is evidence suggesting they derive personal satisfaction from these superficial, peripheral relationships (Fingerman, 2004). Living in a culture where everyone smiles and greets even strangers they encounter leaves one believing the world is a safe place and that people can generally be trusted. (The following TED talk provides insightful examples of the advantages of living in an Includer culture:https://www.ted.com/talks/kio_stark_why_you_should_talk_to_strangers?language =en).

To succeed in their everyday interactions, *Includers* have developed what could be referred to as "social skills for superficial interactions" (Cohen, 1991; Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1994, 1995; Triandis et al., 1988). These skills are most clearly and comprehensively articulated in Dale Carnegie's (1936) classic *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. While this book has little to do with close friendships, it has much to do with being friendly. Readers are taught how to make a good impression, establish warm eye contact, make others feel important, call people by name, show respect, and be positive in all their interactions.

The contrasting social skills of *Excluders* and *Includers* determine their level of comfort in differing social contexts. Speaking in generalities, *Includers* would not be comfortable spending extended periods of time with the same friends. Even close *Includer* friends, for example, are unlikely to enjoy spending a two-week vacation together. By contrast, *Excluders* are typically not at ease when meeting strangers, or at least, such meetings are conducted with some caution and formality, when compared to the instant openness and warmth of *Includers*.

Includers appreciate having their friendly behaviors enthusiastically reciprocated. It's important that others treat them in an equally friendly manner. As a result, they demonstrate a high need for social approval from everyone they encounter (Hofstede, 1991; Lucas, Diener, Grob, Suh, & Shao, 2000). They want everyone, friends and strangers alike, to like them and are disappointed when they don't.

The constant practice of these social skills leaves the impression that *Includers* don't cultivate deeper, more meaningful, and enduring friendships. Descriptions based solely on the classic I-C model tend to promote this conclusion, suggesting that what friendships *Includers* do claim tend to be more shallow and transient (e.g. Goodwin, 1999; Salamon, 1977; Triandis et al., 1988). This assertion has been leveled especially at people in the U.S. Steward and Bennett (1991), for example, have argued that people in the U.S. are generally uninterested in deep, committed, long-term friendships. The fact that they use the term "friend" so loosely contributes to this perception.

The proposed model holds that *Includers* do think of a small group of people as their closest friends, from whom they derive similar benefits, as do *Excluders* who make the distinction between friends and others much more explicitly. Extensive survey research I've done in the U.S., which included respondents of all ages, leads to the conclusion that Americans do cultivate close friendships (Baumgarte & Gareis, 1996). In addition, as stated earlier, there is no convincing evidence that close friendships in the U.S. or other individualist cultures are any less enduring than those in more collectivist cultures. This was evidenced by Baumgarte et al.'s (2001) study which asked respondents in five different cultures to indicate how long they had been close friends with a particular individual and no cultural differences were found.

There's abundant evidence showing that people in the U.S. derive significant psychological and health benefits from their friendships. For example, having close friends has been associated with reduced cardiovascular reactivity to stressful events in people of various ages (Christenfeld et al., 1997; Ertel, Glymour, & Berkman, 2009; Holt-Lunstad, Uchino, Smith, & Hicks, 2007). In major reviews of a number of studies, having friends has been associated with greater longevity (Christakis & Fowler, 2009; Friedman & Martin, 2011). Mental health and general well-being have also been associated with having satisfying friendships for people of all ages (Bagwell et al., 2005; Baumgarte, 2013; Brady, Dolcini, Harper, & Pollack, 2009; Dupertuis, Aldwin & Bossé, 2001; Felton & Berry, 1992; Firestone, Firestone & Catlett, 2003; Larson, Mannell, & Zuzanek, 1986; Sias & Bartoo, 2007).

So while the outward friendliness of *Includers* leaves the impression that they don't distinguish between close friends and others, cognitively and emotionally they can identify a small group of close friends from whom they derive a great deal of health benefits and personal satisfaction (Baumgarte et al., 2001).

A hypothetical case study comparing these two styles of friendship can be found [here].

Realists versus Idealists

This dimension concerns how close friends perceive each other's positive qualities and the implications of those perceptions for their relationships. As the labels suggest, *Realists*, originally seen as characteristic of collectivist cultures, tend to see their close friends in a more nuanced, perhaps more objective light. *Idealists*, associated with individualist cultures, tend to hold positive illusions about their closest friends. This dimension extends our understanding of culture and friendship beyond the classic I-C issues of number of friends, relationship closeness, and the longevity of friendships. It carries implications regarding the assumptions about how friendships come to be, whether they are a matter of destiny or active cultivation, the directness-indirectness of friends' communication patterns, notions of cultural face, and how close friends influence each other's sense of identity.

This dimension originally grew out of the frequent observation in my cross-cultural survey research that people in the U.S. and other individualist cultures tend to rate their close friends more highly than those in collectivist cultures on positive descriptors, such as

"My friend is very intelligent," (Baumgarte et al., 2001) even when responses are corrected for cultural response biases (see van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). It also stems from a line of relationship research that suggests romantic couples tend to hold positive illusions about each other and that these positive illusions are associated with relationship longevity and satisfaction (e.g., Assad, Donnellan, & Conger, 2007; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a, 1996b; Rusbult, Kumashiro, Kubacka, Finkel, & Eli, 2009).

While these studies focused entirely on romantic relationships, there is evidence that friends hold positive illusions about each other as well (Flannagan, Marsh, & Fuhrman, 2005; Goel, Mason, & Watts, 2010; Morray, 2007; Schlenker & Britt, 1999; Wright, 1978). As with any aspect of close relationships, this tendency likely varies over cultures (Dion & Dion, 1996; Endo, Heine, & Lehman, 2000; Hruschka, 2010).

Based on these findings, I've hypothesized that *Realist* friends tend to see each other in a way that includes good points as well as fully perceiving and tolerating their faults. One implication of this more unbiased perception of their friends is that *Realists* tend to speak much more directly and frankly with each other when compared to *Idealist* friends. These franker communicative patterns are seen more often in collectivist cultures (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1983; Hruschka, 2010; Maeda & Ritchie, 2003; Yum & Canary, 2003).

Idealist friends tend to perceive each other in a more positive light, especially when asked about them on anonymous questionnaires (Baumgarte et al., 2001). According to this perspective, *Idealist* friends play a supportive, cheerleading, ego-boosting role in their communications with each other. Yum and Canary (2003) have shown that people in individualist cultures place more emphasis on staying positive in their communication patterns. By contrast, *Realists* don't see it as their role to stroke the egos of their close friends—that doesn't feel genuine, and close friends would readily see through it. For *Idealists*, holding these positive illusions serves a self-enhancement function: Having friends with very positive qualities implies that one is deserving of such friendships (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Morry, 2003, 2007; Schlenker & Britt, 1999; Wright, 1978).

This pattern of communicative frankness and directness among *Realists* runs contrary to the classic I-C approach, which holds that, generally speaking, people in collectivist cultures place greater emphasis on interpersonal harmony, and thus employ indirect forms of communication as a way to avoid confronting or offending others (e.g., Canary & Dainton, 2003; Gudykunst et al., 1996). The proposed model suggests that this well-documented pattern gets reversed when it comes to how people communicate with their closest friends.

Communicative directness between *Realist* friends is more likely to occur when such transactions take place in private settings. They can be critical or confrontational, even about very sensitive issues, saying what they think the friend should hear and what they consider as advantageous for the friend in the long run, rather than acquiesce to polite indirectness (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1983; Hruschka, 2010; Maeda & Ritchie, 2003; Yum & Canary, 2003). Such exchanges are not viewed as conflict (Baumgarte et al., 2001); it's simply what good friends do for each other.

Some of this frankness may stem from the findings that *Realist* friends tend to assume that their relationships are largely a matter of fate or destiny (Goodwin & Findlay, 1997). Thus, for *Realists*, their friendships are givens over which they have little control, somewhat

akin to how those in individualist cultures might think about their sibling relationships. As such, there's little felt need to ingratiate one's self with friends and no drive to constantly say positive things to "maintain" the friendship. These friendships will always be there, just as one's sister will always be one's sister. Honesty and directness in their communications can connote closeness, caring, and trust. *Realist* friends are clear about what such frankness means. There's typically no implication that such talk puts the well-being of the relationship at risk.

Idealists, by contrast, see their friendships as more fragile and in constant need of cultivation and "maintenance" (Yum & Canary, 2003), otherwise they might quickly fade away (Goodwin & Findlay, 1997). This constant drive to maintain a positive tone resembles notions of cultural face saving. The proposed model suggests that *Idealist* friends, despite their association with individualist cultures, tend to be much more sensitive to issues of face in their interpersonal interactions. They are concerned about hurting each other's feelings and often avoid saying openly and directly what they think, especially when those thoughts run contrary to the friend's self perceptions. *Idealist* friends tend to value tact and indirectness, focusing most of their communicative energy on staying positive and boosting each other's egos (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1983; Maeda & Ritchie, 2003; Yum & Canary, 2003).

For *Idealist* friends, it's a matter of showing respect for each other's identity and individuality (Baxter, Dun, & Sahistein, 2001). One would not make negative or critical comments about the other's personality or character (Cupach & Carson, 2002). One tries to see one's close friend in a very positive light, and works to promote this glowing impression when talking about the friend to a third party (Schlenker & Britt, 1999).

Common examples reflecting this dimension can be found [here](#).

Gender

While gender has not been a core focus of my research, an examination of the gender variable for each of the proposed dimensions would further elaborate the cultural findings.

First, one very robust finding seems unrelated to the three proposed dimensions. In my cross-cultural survey research, one reliable gender difference was the tendency of women to place more emphasis than men on talk and emotional expressiveness in their close friendships. A common gender stereotype holds that women spend more of their friendship time in deep and intimate conversation, whereas men tend to engage in some activity of common interest with their friends (e.g., Rawlins, 2009; Fehr, 2004). At least the first half of this assertion is supported in my cross-cultural research. On emotional expressiveness, gender accounted for more than twice the variability compared to the culture variable (Baumgarte et al., 2001).

Regarding the first of the three proposed dimensions, neither Trompenaars' research concerning the friend who was speeding and hit a pedestrian (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998), nor my vignette study where the student was trying to help a close friend be

more studious (Baumgarte, 2001), produced significant gender differences. These findings suggest that gender differences on the *Intervener-Independent* dimension are minimal.

Other gender differences were inconsistent across cultures, and none of them accounted for significant amount of variability. So the picture is much less clear for the *Excluder-Includer* and the *Idealist-Realist* dimensions. Clarifying this picture will require the development of reliable scales for all three dimensions, as described in future research below.

Discussion and Conclusions

Culture and Friendship in Perspective

The proposed model with its six styles of close friendship described here should be viewed as anchor points of the three dimensions describing cultural variations in close friendships. As is the case of the I-C dimension itself, it glosses over a myriad of individual differences. It would be inappropriate to think of these six styles as fixed, culturally rigid stereotypes.

When a friendship forms between two people, whether or not they are from differing cultures, a very wide range of factors come into play, not least of which are the individual personalities of the two friends. They themselves carve out their own unique definition of what it means to be close friends. Any model trying to describe the cultural dynamics that come to bear on their relationship is, by its very nature, a simplification of a very individual and complex process.

Furthermore, friendships are not static, they evolve over time. Chen and Nakazawa (2012) and Pahl (2000) have shown that as these relationships mature, both gender and culture play a less influential role. By contrast, gender and culture account for a larger portion of the variability in friendships of relatively shorter duration. Individuals engaged in a close friendship that has endured over time tend to develop their own unique, idiosyncratic norms, independent of their gender or cultural backgrounds.

Also, my research employs surveys (Baumgarte & Gareis, 1996; Baumgarte et al., 2001), ratings of friendship vignettes (Baumgarte, 2001), and informal interviews based on a limited number of cultures (Baumgarte, 2013). Other than a recent anthropological survey (Hruschka, 2010), to date, no one has conducted a large-scale study examining friendships over more than a handful of cultures. The proposed model should be seen as a first attempt to open a dialogue among social researchers about conceptualizing the cultural aspects of close friendships.

Future Research

Each of the proposed dimensions is based on conclusions drawn from my own research combined with data from a variety of sources as described in each section. Specific measures for each of these dimensions must be developed to establish their validity and theoretical utility to explain cultural variations in close friendships. Once such measures have been developed, a critical question will be how these styles relate to each other.

Since the *Independent*, *Includer*, and *Idealist* styles were, initially at least, associated with the individualism end of the I-C dimension, and the *Intervener*, *Excluder*, and *Realist* styles were associated with collectivism, one would expect that the inter-correlations to follow a similar pattern. But that is an empirical question that remains to be tested. Given the inherent measurement problems of the I-C dimension (e.g., Fischer et al., 2009; Taras et al., 2014) and the modifications of the classic I-C approach growing out of recent research, it is not unreasonable to suspect that the three dimensions might be more independent than what their conceptual bases would predict. For example, are there cultures where the dominant friendship pattern is *Independent* and at the same time *Excluder* and *Realist*? Much work remains to be done.

Practical Implications for Cross-Cultural Friendships

The proposed model of cultural variations in close friendships offers three dimensions or six cultural styles of close friendships: *Independents* versus *Interveners*, *Includers* versus *Excluders*, and *Idealists* versus *Realists*. Friendships that cross cultural lines can be enormously enriching and personally satisfying (Gareis, 1995, 2000; Kudo & Simkin, 2003). But, they also pose difficulties growing out of the simple fact that people have very different, even contradictory, ideas about what it means to be a close friend. These scenarios are ripe for misinterpreting each other's friendly intentions and friendship behaviors.

Based simply on the defining characteristics of each style, one could hypothesize that the well-meaning, caring, but uninvited interventions of *Interveners* could be experienced as invasive and controlling by *Independents* who want to have their autonomy and identity respected. The self-disclosing, verbally supportive orientation of *Independents*, which isn't followed by concrete actions, would feel shallow and insincere to the *Intervener*. It doesn't feel like genuine friendship.

Similarly, the overt and indiscriminant friendliness of the *Includers* would feel superficial and ostentatious to the *Excluder*. *Excluders* are likely to see *Includers* as incapable of truly close and exclusive friendships. *Includers* would see *Excluders* as snobbish, cold, or self-absorbed, and not really interested in being friends.

The frank talk of the *Realist* would feel confrontational and condescending to the *Idealist*. They are likely to think that such a disagreeable person can't be interested in being friends. The *Realists* would see the constantly upbeat, overly agreeable and optimistic orientation of the *Idealist* as lacking in substance or depth.

For people with these very differing styles of friendship to become close friends would require a great deal of compromising in their ideas about the very meaning of friendship. The proposed model of cultural variations in close friendship is intended to provide insight and understanding to people cultivating such friendships.

Further Readings

For readers interested in a more detailed description of these six styles along with numerous examples and anecdotes, may read:

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Discussion Questions

1. Discuss in small groups what each of you sees as the critical qualities of a close friendship. After you have listed the qualities, rearrange the list according to priority, reflecting its importance in your life, from most to least important. For example, is coming to your aid in time of need a critical definer of a close friend? Or is it more important that the friend be someone you just like hanging out with, having fun, sharing life's ups and downs.

2. This exercise is also best done in small groups. Fons Trompenaars asked respondents from differing cultures to imagine they were riding in a car being driven by a close friend. The friend was clearly driving above the speed limit and accidentally hit a pedestrian. Imagine that you were the only witness to the event. In a court of law, if you testify that your friend was speeding, he/she would most certainly go to jail. If you testify that your

friend was not speeding, he/she would most certainly go free. How would you testify? Discuss your reasoning and compare your reasons with others.

3. According to the research cited in this article, people in the USA have the international reputation of being uninterested in close and committed friendships. Instead, this research suggests that people in the USA prefer a larger number of more shallow or superficial friends. Do you think this reputation is deserved? What do you think forms the basis of this stereotype? If you grew up in the USA, do you think this stereotype fits your own friendships?

4. In some cultures, it is considered the norm to be open and friendly with most people one encounters in everyday life. In other cultures, it is normal to mostly ignore people one does not know personally, and reserve one's social interactions to a select few, family, work colleagues, and close friends. What do you see as the social-emotional advantages and disadvantages of each approach to one's social life? Try to find a balanced answer, seeing both the upside and downside of each approach.

5. Think carefully about this question, which requires a high degree of self knowledge and candor. To what degree do you hold back saying what you really think with your closest friends? Have you ever felt critical of a friend but at the same time, hesitated to say anything, for fear of hurting the friend's feelings? How do your responses to this question fit with the *Realist-Idealist* dimension?

6. Do you feel it is your duty or responsibility to come to the aid of a friend who is in need, to "take care" of them? Clearly, we all feel a sense of duty or responsibility to take care of our children, especially when they are young. Do you hold analogous feelings regarding your closest friends? Or do you find that idea inappropriate? We may help friends when we can, but that aid grows more out of a sense of affection rather than duty. Which approach best describes your feelings about friendship and how do your feelings relate to the *Intervener-Independent* dimension of the proposed model?

7. Overall, how would you rate yourself on the three dimensions of close friendship discussed in this article? Are you personally more of an *Independent* or an *Intervener*? More *Includer* or *Excluder*? More *Realist* or *Idealist*? Of course, we all tend to think we are "both" for each dimension, depending on circumstances and which friend we are referring to. But speaking in generalities, which side of each dimension best describes your approach to close friendship.

8. What do you see as critical differences between men's friendships and women's friendships? Do you see these differences as important and profound or simply superficialities? Given your view of this issue, do you think it is possible for a man and woman to be close friends, i.e., just friends, without romantic complications? What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of such friendships? If you are in such a relationship, how do you handle romantic tendencies? Does the culture in which you live influence the prevalence of such friendships? If so, how and why?

About the Author

Roger Baumgarte has a doctorate in research psychology (1973, Bowling Green University) and has spent the last twenty-five years researching and studying cultural variations in close friendship. This passion grew out of friendships he forged while teaching at universities in France and South Korea. He also has an interest in the manifold health and well-being benefits of cultivating close and satisfying friendships. He taught research methods and cross-cultural psychology at Winthrop University (South Carolina) for 30 years, served as director of their international center, while also helping corporations and other groups deal with cultural issues in their organizations. He is author of *Friends Beyond Borders: Cultural Variations in Close Friendships.* You can contact him at Baumgarte@earthlink.net.

Case Studies and Examples

An *Intervener* and an *Independent* as friends

To render all of these ideas a bit more tangible, I will offer a hypothetical case study demonstrating what might happen when an *Intervener* and an *Independent* try to forge a mutually satisfying friendship between them. This story is based loosely on a composite of actual events I witnessed while living in South Korea.

In this story, George is from the USA and prefers the *Independent* style of friendship, while Dae-Jung is a Korean who tends toward the *Intervener* style.

George is 32, a new arrival in Seoul working as the local representative of an advertising agency contracted by a Korean automaker to develop an ad campaign for the U.S. and other international markets. Dae-Jung is 33 and a professor of English at a major university in Seoul. George is seeking a tennis partner to continue his passion for the sport in his new environment and he is introduced to Dae-Jung through work associates. Even after just one match, the two realize they have similar levels of both skill and desire to practice the sport as often as possible.

Dae-Jung helps George obtain a membership in his racquet club, no small feat given the connections required for gaining admittance. They play often, typically two or three times a week, and they usually spend ten or fifteen minutes chatting afterwards while sitting on benches to cool down. Most of their talk revolves around tennis, about critical plays in the matches they just completed as well as watching and commenting on the play of others.

They also begin talking about other things. Dae-Jung is married with a three-year-old boy. He has spent time in the U.S. and Australia as part of his education and also for vacations. George is single, having broken up with a woman just prior to being assigned to Korea. He enjoys living in Korea and is viewing it as an opportunity for a fresh start. He is working hard to learn the language and to accommodate to the local foods and customs. Each man has a sense of humor and they are quick to find ways to poke fun at each other's game. George is constantly telling jokes that aren't always fully appreciated by Dae-Jung, who assumes something is getting lost in translation.

Around the third week, Dae-Jung invites George out with him and his family for dinner at a Kalbi restaurant to enjoy some local barbeque. They meet at the restaurant, and George discovers that Dae-Jung's wife has brought a friend along, and as the evening unfolds, it becomes evident the couple was trying to introduce him to a potential woman friend. He finds the woman attractive, but communications are awkward since she speaks little English and he is just beginning to learn Korean. He wishes Dae-Jung had warned him in advance of his matchmaking intentions, rather than leaving him to sort through the confusing signals he is getting from both the woman and the couple. The whole evening is a bit uncomfortable and embarrassing.

Both men laugh about it at their next tennis outing—Dae-Jung jokingly trying to figure out if the match between George and the woman has potential to develop into a budding, intercultural romance, and George making fun of Dae-Jung's attempts at playing Cupid. In

fact, George is not interested in any serious dating at this point, with everything so new and unclear compared to the dating scene at home.

At about this same time, Dae-Jung discovers George is still living in a hotel because of the difficulties in obtaining a furnished apartment. George's assignment in Korea will probably not extend beyond two years and finding appropriate lodging compatible with that time frame is not easy.

Dae-Jung has a cousin who owns an apartment that is available and could be furnished to meet George's needs. They agree to check it out together but George finds it quite small and doesn't like its location, which is at some distance from his work. Dae-Jung is quite insistent he take it, since it is unlikely George can find a better deal. George feels Dae-Jung is being much too pushy, and eventually has to insist he isn't interested in renting the apartment, regardless of what a good deal it would be.

At one point, Dae-Jung complains about the difficulty he has in securing internships in local industries for his students studying English. George, with all of his connections in the advertising and auto industries, offers to see what he can do. But nothing ever comes of it.

Case analysis

Let's look back over this case and analyze it from the perspective of the two styles of friendship presented so far: *Interveners* and *Independents*. The experiences of George and Dae-Jung exemplify the potential for conflicts when an *Independent* and an *Intervener* try to forge a mutually satisfying friendship. Both enjoy playing tennis and their post-game chats, but Dae-Jung is constantly frustrated by George's unresponsiveness as a friend. Dae-Jung helps him gain membership in the tennis club, introduces him to an attractive woman and in other ways tries to intervene in his life as a friend should. When George complains about his living arrangements, Dae-Jung even finds him an apartment, yet George seems clearly unappreciative. George doesn't seem to raise a finger to help him find internships for his English students.

From George's perspective, he enjoys the companionship of Dae-Jung, but at times he also feels manipulated, or that Dae-Jung is being too pushy, not allowing him to make his own decisions. Dae-Jung is fun and caring, but just a bit too controlling, constantly wanting to take over and run his life. It is hard to get him to take "no" for an answer.

For Dae-Jung and George to develop a mutually satisfying friendship, they will have to compromise on their *Intervener* and *Independent* notions about what it means to be a good friend.

It is worth noting that the misunderstandings occurring between Dae-Jung and George could easily occur within any given culture, including between friends in the USA. In this case, however, we would be more inclined to think of the differences as reflecting their individual personalities rather than their cultural backgrounds. Dae-Jung might be seen as generous and perhaps a bit too controlling, George as fun, but maybe somewhat insensitive. For this reason, it is best to think about *Interveners* and *Independents* as two opposing styles of friendship, rather than fixed, culturally determined entities.

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Case Studies and Examples

An *Excluder* and an *Includer* as friends

So what happens when an *Excluder* and an *Includer* try to forge a friendship with each other? In this composite case, based on stories I witnessed over the years working with international students, problems in communications will be obvious from the very beginning.

Marie-Pierre from Montpellier, France, and Sarah from Fort Lauderdale, Florida were newly arriving graduate students, Marie-Pierre an MBA student and Sarah beginning a graduate program in school psychology. They met through an ad Sarah had posted outside the housing office indicating she was seeking a roommate for her two bedroom apartment. Sarah was anxious to find someone since she couldn't afford the rent on her own.

In this case, I will designate Sarah as the *Includer* and Marie-Pierre as the *Excluder*, although it is important to remember it is not difficult to find *Excluders* in the USA and *Includers* in France. Despite these reductionist stereotypes, we must always guard against over-thinking these generalities.

The two met by chance when Sarah spied Marie-Pierre reading her ad outside the housing office. She approached her with a broad smile and a sales pitch about the amenities of the apartment and how nice it would be for them to be roommates. Marie-Pierre found Sarah warm, charming and funny, and they decided to ride over to look at the place.

Sarah's first impressions of Marie-Pierre weren't completely positive. Marie-Pierre appeared distracted, with tired eyes that always seemed to be looking off to the side when they spoke. Sarah tried to put her at ease by asking about her hometown, her family and why she decided to come to this university. Marie-Pierre gave short answers that weren't very revealing and she didn't ask Sarah anything in return except for the rent arrangements and other issues related to the apartment. Sarah attributed Marie-Pierre's lack of warmth to jetlag and perhaps her wariness of being in an unfamiliar environment. She also seemed to be struggling with her English.

From Marie-Pierre's point of view, she found Sarah instantly likeable. She seemed warm and caring and Marie-Pierre felt lucky to have met her, thinking she would make a good roommate and she was excited about the possibility of making an American friend. Marie-Pierre agreed to move in and Sarah, quite relieved, helped move her things since Marie-Pierre didn't own a car. The first few weeks went well, although both were quite busy with school. They each liked to cook, and on several occasions they shared dinners together, drinking wine, and talking late into the evening, often bemoaning the lack of men in their lives, an unfortunate but inevitable side effect of being overworked graduate students.

These long and personal conversations led Marie-Pierre to think she and Sarah were becoming close friends. Sarah told her all about her recent break-up with her college boyfriend. Sarah liked Marie-Pierre, although some of her personal habits irritated her. Marie-Pierre tended to lag when it was her turn to do dishes and always left hair all over the bathroom sink and shower. But these things were minor, and Sarah never mentioned them. Overall, she was slowly growing to like Marie-Pierre.

Sarah kept urging Marie-Pierre to invite some of her fellow MBA students over for a party, especially since the Business School had a surplus of single men. Marie-Pierre said she didn't know her fellow students well enough to do that, but she did mention that she was invited to a party of fellow MBA students and she would feel much better about going if Sarah went with her. Sarah was elated and both of them looked forward to the event.

When the party was over, each had very different reactions. Sarah had the time of her life—laughing and talking with everyone, drinking just a bit too much, but in the end, meeting lots of new people, including some guys with real potential. She also liked going out with Marie-Pierre whose French accent seemed to charm everyone. She was impressed with how much fun Marie-Pierre could be at a party.

For Marie-Pierre, the party was unlike any she had ever known. Everyone seemed bent on drinking as much as possible, some of the guys were playing video games, others watching basketball on TV, and no one was dancing. She was worried for Sarah who drank too much, talked loudly and inappropriately to everyone, especially the guys. Although they went to the party together, Marie-Pierre thought Sarah mostly ignored her, except to occasionally mock her accent, which got laughs from everyone. The experience caused her to rethink their developing friendship.

Case analysis

Viewing this scenario from the *Includer-Excluder* perspective, upon first meeting, Sarah was put off by Marie-Pierre's lack of eye contact and reticent manner. Marie-Pierre found Sarah's warmth and friendliness very reassuring and felt they could be good roommates and perhaps good friends as well. Marie-Pierre was charmed by Sarah's social skills for superficial exchanges making her feel instantly at ease.

Sarah's tendency to share her problems and talk about personal matters left Marie-Pierre believing they were becoming close friends. Later though, Marie-Pierre grew disappointed that Sarah didn't seem to value their friendship. They had agreed to go to the party together, but Sarah mostly ignored her, while saying overly personal things to everyone else. Sarah's mocking her accent and other subtle indicators left her feeling there was some hidden tension between them, that Sarah was upset about something but not telling her directly. All this left Marie-Pierre wondering if Sarah was even capable of close friendship, because of, in the words of the cross-cultural theorists, her lack of social skills for closeness.

It is worth noting that both Marie-Pierre and Sarah had friendly intentions, both wanted friendship. Each had their own ways of expressing those feelings. Their communication lapses and misunderstandings stemmed from their differing notions about what it means to be a good friend.

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Case Studies and Examples

A *Realist* and an *Idealist* as friends

So what happens when a *Realist* and an *Idealist* try to forge a friendship with each other? Most typically, it is the blunt talk of the *Realist* that creates problems for this friendship combination. The *Idealist* tends to interpret strong disagreement about any issue as personal rejection and a lack of the validation they are accustomed to receiving from close friends.

In my work with international students, many of whom were much more *Realist* in their friendship orientations, I saw this issue as a primary stumbling block in their friendships with the more *Idealist* American students. Sometimes they would strongly disagree with the *Idealist* student, and it could be about anything, including sensitive issues such as politics, or one's basic philosophy of life. Or it could concern much less controversial issues like music, sports or clothes. The *Idealist* student tended to see their disagreeing as arrogance, or a put-down, an indication that the *Realist* students didn't like them and wasn't interested in friendship.

Realists, on the other hand, have a problem with the *Idealists'* inclination to constantly speak in a positive, supportive way, trying to boost their egos. It comes off as shallow and insincere, or as inappropriate flattery. It just doesn't feel like true friendship. In addition, the *Idealist* seeks to have his or her own ego stroked by the friend, which is perceived as self-centered and egotistical by the *Realist*.

The *Realist* may long for conversations that dig deep into important issues, which can be fun and help cement the feeling of having a very good friend to share such ideas with, even when there is strong disagreement. To the *Realist*, the *Idealist* seems nice and friendly, but lacking in substance and commitment. A Thai student at my university expressed this perspective most succinctly, saying, "I often wonder who is really behind that smiling face."

Clearly, for the *Idealists* and *Realists* to form a mutually satisfying friendship, there needs to be some open-mindedness on how they see the role of the supportive friend.

As always, I would like to caution about these cultural stereotypes. My assertion that friends in the USA tend to be *Idealists* who rarely directly criticize their friends on important issues is a gross generalization, with frequent exceptions. As with all cultural norms, there are important regional differences. Inner city New Yorkers can be much more direct with both compliments and criticism than are people in the southeast where I live. Stereotypically, southerners are masters of the indirect put-down, bless their hearts!

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